

15 | ‘When it’s there I am, it’s here I wish I was’: Martin McDonagh and the Construction of Connemara

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The latest in the Royal Court’s amazing run of exciting discoveries is Martin McDonagh, another fine Irish playwright. He’s only in his mid-twenties, damn him, and his first play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, is an absolute cracker. The extraordinary achievement is that it is wildly funny, deeply affecting and grotesquely macabre all at the same time. During its most potent scenes, you don’t know whether to laugh, cry or gasp with horror.²

Charles Spencer’s review for the *Daily Telegraph* (8 March 1996) of Martin McDonagh’s play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* typifies the critical euphoria that greeted the Royal Court/Druid Theatre co-production on its London debut in 1996. Having premiered in the Town Hall Theatre in Galway on 1 February 1996, McDonagh’s play has been described as ‘astonishing’³ and this specific production has garnered numerous prestigious accolades, including four Tony Awards after its Broadway run in 1998, one of these the first ever award for a female director, Garry Hynes. The play catapulted McDonagh into the unenviable role of the latest in a long line of ‘the next big thing’ amongst Irish playwrights, despite the fact that his distinctly Anglo-Irish heritage calls into question the very nomenclature used by critics to categorize him. The play has been performed by various theatre companies throughout the

world and the cast of Anna Manahan, Kate Burton, Ruaidhri Conroy and Peter Gowen embarked on a sell-out 13 venue, 4 month tour of the UK and Ireland in 2000. The critical and commercial success of the play, however, belies the inherent inconsistencies in both its dramatic and linguistic constructions that crucially undermine the cultural authenticity that it so obviously craves. The play's loose structure, within which McDonagh allows a significant and unsettling chronological gaffe to occur, develops in a traditional tragicomic fashion, culminating in the none-too-astonishing murder of Mag by her daughter, Maureen. McDonagh's combination of melodrama, naturalism and black comedy, coupled with a distinctive Irish background, has obviously struck a chord with audiences and critics desperate for a Syngean successor yet the dramatic effect of the play serves merely to highlight the traditional nature of the *oeuvre* within which McDonagh has chosen to operate.

McDonagh, however, treads on dangerous ground because he has attempted to dislocate a stock tragicomic form and setting by subverting some of the central elements of the tragic-comic genre, such as the clear delineation of the tragic and the comic. One obvious technique is the running gag of the smell of urine from the sink, a comic interlude that is regularly used to alleviate a potentially explosive encounter. The danger in this is that too often McDonagh appears to be merely tinkering with the genre, happy to include a few contemporary references to recognizable icons of popular culture while maintaining the predictable plotline of the standard tragicomic dramatic construction, thereby creating the suspicion that the genre is not being dislocated at all. Charles Spencer's inability to know whether to 'laugh, cry or gasp with horror' says less perhaps about McDonagh's dramatic abilities than it does about the critic's obvious lack of knowledge of the basic tenets of black comedy, a dramatic form which extracts its laughter precisely from chance, cruelty, suffering and death, all of which are clearly signposted in McDonagh's play. In the first description of Mag Folan, for example, he emphasizes that 'her left hand is somewhat more shrivelled and red than her right',⁴ a clear reference to some previous sinister and perhaps violent past event. That Maureen should eventually kill her mother should really come

as no surprise to an audience drip-fed details that obviously herald the violent climax of the play while the eventual murder weapon, a heavy iron poker, makes its appearance in the opening setting of scene one. The oft-noted critical reaction of shock at the murder of Mag fails to take account of the clear early indications that all is not and has not been well with Maureen Folan for some time.

Equally, the deliberate setting of the trilogy in Connemara undoubtedly places certain dramatic and linguistic pressures on McDonagh. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is overtly set in a specific West of Ireland location in a particular time, 1989, and McDonagh goes to a good deal of trouble to specifically relate the action with the setting and the chronological time, a task that is somewhat foisted upon him by the conscious foregrounding of Connemara at a particular time in its evolution. In an overtly conscious attempt to capture the grammatical, syntactical, and idiomatic language of Connemara, McDonagh has recreated a speech pattern reminiscent of Synge and *The Playboy of the Western World*, a work to which McDonagh's play pays linguistic homage. The realism of the dialogic exchanges between Maureen and Mag, peppered as it is with cutting wit and sharp rivalry, is skewed by McDonagh's somewhat tortured syntactical constructions, consciously foregrounded in an attempt to present an authentic snapshot of Connemara speech. However, on closer analysis, the speech patterns used by McDonagh appear to owe more to a semantically romanticized Syngean legacy than an accurate portrayal of the linguistic patterns of Connemara. For example, in one typical exchange in scene eight, Maureen and Mag communicate in their usual linguistic *modus operandi*, composed of equal measures of accusation, reprimand, bitter recollection and ironic admonishment. Maureen is reflecting on a night spent with her lover, Pato, and comments to her mother 'Aye, a great aul time me and Pato did have' (44). When translated into Connemara Irish, the phrase reads 'Sea, bhí an-time agam fhein agus ag Pato'.⁵ However, when this Irish is translated back into the English common to Connemara, it reads as follows: 'Ah, Pato and meself had a great time'. Therefore, a more realistic portrayal of Connemara speech, based on the translations of renowned author, life-time native speaker and Connemara resident, Pdraig Breathnach, would have

Maureen recalling the night in the somewhat more prosaic construction of the translation rather than a more consciously staged Irish linguistic construction operated by McDonagh. While translations are notoriously idiosyncratic and open to myriad interpretations, there are countless examples throughout *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in which McDonagh departs from his much sought-after authenticity in favour of a somewhat contrived linguistic construction that appears to trace its heritage more from John Ford's 1952 film *The Quiet Man* than the dialogic exchanges that would be noted in *Leenane* in the late 1980s. Indeed, Father Jack from *Father Ted* would have been proud of the nine consecutive 'fecks' that Ray somewhat absurdly manages at the beginning of scene six in expressing his exasperation at the tardiness of Maureen's expected return. This artificiality, masked as it is under a veil of brash realism, undermines McDonagh's play to the extent that the dramatic events, as they unfold, also appear to hark to a previous dramatic age rather than tilting towards a fresh and much needed appraisal of the chronic immaturity and emotional illiteracy that would appear to characterize the relationship between Mag and Maureen. This is the contested space that McDonagh occupies in contemporary Irish theatre and it is the varying interpretations as to the subversive nature of his plays that arouses such heated debate between those who see him as a challenging postmodern deconstructor of rural Ireland and those who, in Declan Kiberd's words, see him as a playwright who 'traduces rather than represents western people'.⁶

By choosing a linguistic construction that pays homage to a clearly bygone dramatic age rather than attempting to recreate contemporary speech, perhaps unwittingly McDonagh admits that the themes of his play, however dressed up, also belong to a somewhat hackneyed theatrical past rather than the abrasive, confrontational future so cherished by his critics. Indeed, Patrick Kavanagh's epic poem *The Great Hunger*, first published in 1942, provides a far more realistic and depressing portrayal of rural Irish familial relationships without relying upon the shock-horror tactic of direct physical violence. McDonagh has claimed that he is more influenced by Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver* than *The Playboy of the Western World*, yet *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* certainly

borrowed heavily from Synge in both structure and dialogue, and the troubled Travis Bickle carries an immense menace and unpredictability that is notably absent from McDonagh's theatrical creation. Equally, Bickle's troubled existence is essentially urban, played out against the stifling heat of the city of New York and it tackles a range of political and social issues that are utterly lacking in McDonagh's claustrophobic *Leenane*.

This linguistic construction is not, however, without its supporters. Ireland's leading drama critic, Fintan O'Toole, likens McDonagh's writing to Harold Pinter and David Mamet, holding 'in perfect tension ... the rhythms and structures, the twists and elisions of Irish speech',⁷ and certainly the language of McDonagh's plays undermines the binary opposites of the linguistic constructions of both Irish and English. He grew up in a house where both languages were spoken and within the strong Irish community in the Elephant and Castle in London he was exposed, at an early age, to the inflections, elisions and cadences inherent and exclusive to the two traditions, and it is precisely in this confused confluence of cultures that McDonagh can be perceived as offering something new, rather than the general critical acclaim that has been heaped on his plotlines and dialogue. In a telling article in *The New York Times* in 1999, Declan Kiberd draws a close parallel between McDonagh and Synge, acknowledging that his (McDonagh's) plays 'capture also the lyricism of Yeats and Gregory, as well as the bleakness picked up upon by Synge and Gregory',⁸ a tacit acknowledgment of the of the linguistic duality of McDonagh's dialogue.

It is important to explore the idiosyncratic aspects of an accent because one of the central claims of authenticity that a play can aspire towards is an accurate reflection of the accent and dialect of the location of the action, particularly if that location is referred to as specifically as it is in McDonagh's play. If McDonagh is prepared to utilize the motif of the Australian television soap opera in an attempt to capture how people really live, then it equally behoves him to attempt to replicate, as accurately as possible, the rhythms, phonetics and intonations of Connemara if this sense of cultural authenticity is to be maintained. Surely the accurate detail of the popularity of Australian soaps should be

carried over into the construction of dialogic exchanges if McDonagh is to maintain his grip on his audiences willing suspension of disbelief. However, the introduction of *Sons and Daughters* as the choice of viewing in the Folan household appears to be almost too much for Michael Billington of *The Guardian* who (8 March 1996) describes the introduction of this particular programme into the play as 'a postmodern irony', the Aussie soap immediately establishing, in his opinion, 'a global village as the characters stare at the Australian soaps on the box'. It would appear that here, once again, the Syngean dupe has been played on a critic desperate for a successor to emerge from the shadow of the master. The reference to *Sons and Daughters* is brief and Ray's expressed liking for the fact that a lot of the girls in the programme wear swimsuits again introduces a lighter note into a scene charged with the classic tension of the about-to-be-delivered note. Again, this apparent postmodern irony could extend to Mag's 'often expressed preference for Kimberley biscuits', a relatively exotic biscuit introduced to the Irish market in the 1970s. Unfortunately, Kimberley's also flatter to deceive, tasting more like mouldy cardboard filled with silicone bath sealant. However, McDonagh's appreciation of the nuances of rural taste, perceptive as it is, does not make it naturally or automatically subversive, in that these economic changes endemic in Irish society cannot easily be perceived as indicative of a generation unable or unwilling to put up with the interference of the previous generation. McDonagh's overt references to *Complan*, Kimberley's, *Sons and Daughters*, and *Swingball* are not enough to make his play notably postmodern or indeed even conventionally challenging, merely culturally perceptive. It is when a character like Maureen has the courage and, more importantly, the ingenuity to change her life without destroying both herself and the perceived cause of her troubles in the process that a play like *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* can begin to claim the status that so many critics appear willing to ascribe. Blood on the floor is no longer shocking, even in the theatre. The nature of a good deal of the lives lived in rural Ireland throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century was arguably best described by Patrick Kavanagh as the wishy-washy way of true tragedy⁹ and it is certainly arguable that McDonagh's

play would have achieved a greater deal of dramatic intensity if Maureen could have avoided the inevitable and clearly signposted killing of her mother. Patrick Maguire, the anti-hero of Kavanagh's long poem, is cut to the quick by his mother's shrill commands and her bitter longevity is something that he has to bear until he is an old man himself:

A year passed and another after it
 And still Patrick Maguire was six months behind life –
 His mother six months ahead of it;
 His sister straddle-legged across it: –
 One leg in hell and the other in heaven
 And between the purgatory of middle-aged virginity –
 She prayed for release to heaven or hell.
 His mother's voice grew thinner like a rust worn knife
 But it cut more venomously as it thinned,
 It cut him up the middle till he became more woman than man,
 And it cut through his mind in the end.¹⁰

The setting of the West of Ireland places McDonagh as one of the latest in a long line of playwrights to favour this particular, if often loosely described, landscape. The melancholic nature of the allure of the West typifies the exilic conundrum, where a perception of being forced away from home by economic circumstances is compounded by the physical beauty and isolation of the landscape. Indeed, one of the key moments in the play arrives in scene four when Maureen is forced to admit that she has spent some time in a mental institution in England in the late 1960s. She proceeds to describe the England of Paul Brady's popular 1981 song *Nothing But The Same Old Story*: menial labour and racial abuse being the order of the day. Pato, however, offers a more sophisticated reading of the experience, in which his articulation of life in England points to the complexities of emotions experienced by those who work abroad:

Pato: ... when its there I am, its here I wish I was, of course. Who wouldn't? But when it is here I am ... it isn't there I want to be, of course not. But I know it isn't here I want to be either (21-2).

His confusion perfectly captures the inherent challenge of any contemporary portrayal of a place like Connemara. The 2002 census in Ireland shows the rapid increase in population that has

occurred in Ireland over the past five years. Isolated counties have shown large increases in population in line with the national 11% increase in population to almost 4 million (3, 917,336 to be exact) the highest level since the 1880s and up a phenomenal 290,000 between 1986 and 2002 alone.¹¹ Areas like Connemara have benefited from this influx with a 9.9% increase in population since 1996, and the establishment of large American multinational companies in the Galway area have pushed property prices and population in Connemara to unprecedented levels. While McDonagh's play is clearly set in a more economically and socially depressed 1989 (indeed, previous census figures echo this economic malaise with a national decrease in population of 15,000 between 1986 and 1991), its first production in the mid-1990s would have coincided with the economic boom that was experienced in many parts of Ireland. Consequently, the Folan kitchen, bereft as it is of mod cons (with the notable exception of the TV), would appear increasingly remote to an audience whose experiences of material advancement and economic prosperity would undoubtedly alter their appreciation of the dramatic environment. By failing to tap into the zeitgeist of change that characterized Irish society, McDonagh's play appears to be even more reliant upon a re-working of an older theatrical tradition and plot than any challenging of its formal central elements. Indeed, this challenge would appear to be more apparent in the work of, amongst others, Brian Friel and Tom Murphy, more sophisticated creators of a subtler dramatic environment, nonetheless challenging in their themes than McDonagh but prepared to allow their audience some hermeneutical flexibility. McDonagh has been described as the Tarantino of Theatre, and this clever alliterative title is one that has been used more than once. In a review of the play in July 1999, Kamal Al-Solaylee noted that 'it is all too easy to think of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* as a Quentin Tarantino movie transplanted to a remote West of Ireland village'¹² with 'more than enough torture, blood and petty but amusing thuggery to pass the most rigorous Tarantino-wannabe test'. According to these criteria, one wonders what the reviewer would have made of Brendan Kennelly's contemporary version of *Medea*, in which the heroine murders her brother and chops his body into bits, cuts the throats

of her beloved two sons, and orchestrates the painful deaths of two other innocent parties, escaping scot-free from the high body-count. This loose equation of two very different genres is clearly an attempt to spice up the public perception of a theatre under threat from the dominance of the cinematic genre.

In McDonagh's *Leenane*, it rains incessantly, and the dreary backdrop of the endless sheets of rain provide a somewhat predictable environmental reinforcement of the claustrophobic atmosphere of the main setting, the kitchen of the Foley household. Once again, McDonagh follows a favoured theatrical device of the kitchen setting with its potential for violence (cookers, ranges, pokers, hot oil, etc) and the original Druid production utilized a stage which certainly appeared more 1880s than 1980s.

One of the most glaring errors in the play occurs over the argument about Mag's confiscation of Ray's Swingball. Again, McDonagh uses a contemporary cultural reference to overtly place his characters at a particular time in their development. Swingball was an immensely popular children's game in the 1980s and the fact that it has reached *Leenane* is testament to the fact of the changing nature of rural Irish society, a society which is rapidly being homogenized through the proliferation of icons of popular culture, including Australian television soap operas. Ray accuses Maureen of confiscating the ball of his Swingball in 1979 (38), what he refers to as 'ten years ago', and is incensed when he spots the confiscated ball sitting on a shelf in Maureen's kitchen. Maureen's sad apology, in which she admits that 'me head was in a funny owl way in them days' (58) is not well received and leads to Ray's often repeated accusation that Maureen is 'a loon'. Now this clearly places the play in 1989, ten years after the confiscation of the ball. However, in an earlier exchange in the same scene, when Ray casually tells Maureen the devastating news of her lover Pato's engagement to Dolores Hooley, he notes that their impending wedding will take place in America 'July next' (57), that is, 1990. However, Ray is concerned that the 'Yankee bastards' (57) will not have 'the European Championships on telly' because 'they don't care about football at all'. He twice mentions the name of this particular football event, which he worries, will clash with his brother's wedding. Dramatically, his interest in the football is

clearly designed to heighten Maureen's despair at the news of Pato's betrayal and Ray's complete lack of interest in Maureen's plight and merely reinforces the futility of her mother's murder. Ray's much loved swingball becomes a focus for the depiction of the futile nature of much of Maureen's life, an icon of ensnared hope and shattered dreams. However, the effectiveness of this scene is somewhat skewed when one considers the fact that the World Cup took place in Italy in July 1990, and not the European Championships (they had already occurred in Germany in 1988). There are, of course, two ways of looking at this particular error. Firstly, it could be indicative of Ray's lack of awareness, but the fact that he says he is going to write to his brother about postponing his proposed wedding would indicate that he cares deeply about football and therefore would be unlikely to confuse two such important sporting events. Secondly, it can be construed as sloppy writing from McDonagh, a major sequential confusion in a play that relies a good deal upon the portrayal of specific social, cultural, and environmental detail clearly designed to reinforce the authenticity that the play clearly attempts to recreate. If, as Kate Stratton declares, 'McDonagh is a superb technician' and his play is 'full of gritty, realistic detail',¹³ then this error has to stand as an example of authorial negligence that sits uneasily with the expected sympathy for the duped Maureen, occurring as it does in the same speech in which Maureen learns that her future has, once again, been taken from her. In his review, Michael Billington refers to the play as 'a model of rustic realism', but surely McDonagh's mistake, if that is what it is, is one that could have been easily avoided with a little careful editing. It might appear churlish to focus on a detail that does not appear to overtly affect the overall dramatic development of the play, but such an error, occurring as it does at a crucial dramatic moment, undermines the play's effectiveness and places the audience into a curious time warp where real events and real dates do not coincide. If the audience is to believe that the Complan is indeed lumpy then other details should be what McDonagh says they are. McDonagh overtly uses real television programmes and real consumer products in his attempt to present the real Folan household, but this chronological gaffe unfortunately undermines this authenticity at a potentially fatal moment.

The Beauty Queen of Læenane is a powerful play that deals with important social, personal, and cultural issues but it is important to question the overwhelming critical response to the play as shocking, postmodern, innovative, and indicative of a bright, brash future for Irish theatre. The *mise-en-scène* (dreary kitchen, audible rain, run-down furniture, claustrophobic design) appears to immediately immerse the play into the world of a generalized and recognizable Irish misery. The incessant rain parallels the incessant bitterness of the exchanges between Maureen and Mag and with virtually no chinks of light in this abusive mutual tirade it is difficult to see any change in pace over the course of the play. Indeed, the violent conclusion is clearly indicated by McDonagh from the very first stage direction. Mag's murder becomes almost a theatrical *fait accompli*, firmly posted in scene four when Mag tells Pato that Maureen burned her hand over a hot range and poured boiling oil over her for good measure. The pressure is built effectively but without a break – the killing appears almost inevitable. Whacking Mag on the head with a poker appears to be an overtly dramatic gesture that is relatively easy to achieve. It is ironic that the violent conclusion conforms to the soap opera genre of a narrative cul-de-sac: if the narrative is flagging, stick someone in hospital, or better still, murder them!

¹ A version of this article appeared in *Working Papers Irish Studies* 2, 3-2, 2002.

² Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph* 8 March, 1996, found at <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/reviews/beautyqueen.html>. All of the reviews mentioned can be found at this site.

³ *The Guardian* 8 March 1996.

⁴ Martin Mc Donagh, *The Beauty Queen of Læenane* (London: Methuen, 1986), p.1. All subsequent references will be from this edition.

⁵ The noted Connemara author, lecturer and native speaker, Padraig Breathnach, carried out this translation.

⁶ Declan Kiberd, 'The Real Ireland, Some Think?', *The New York Times* 25 April 1999.

⁷ Fintan O'Toole, *Plays 1: The Læenane Trilogy* (London: Methuen, 1998), p.x.

⁸ Kiberd, *The New York Times*.

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- ⁹ See 'Self-Portrait in *Collected Poems* (London: Martin Brian and O'Keefe, 1972).
- ¹⁰ *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (New York: Kavanagh Hand Press Inc., 1996), pp.98-9.
- ¹¹ See <http://www.cso.ie/census/preliminary-details.html>.
- ¹² 'Reservoir Broads: Reid Shines in Tarantino-esque Beauty queen' at http://www.eyenet/issue_10.07.99/arta/beauty_queen/html.
- ¹³ *Time Out* 10 December 1996.